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FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND THE HUMANITIES.

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AMONG THOSE THINGS THAT HAVE AFFECTED FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING PERHAPS ADVERSELY, THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY EXEMPLIFIES WELL THE EMPHASIS PUT ON TECHNOLOGY AND ELECTRONICS AND THE TENDENCY IN OUR TIME TO "TRAIN" A PERSON RATHER THAN TO "EDUCATE" HIM. THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY CAN BE USED TO HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP AUDIOLINGUAL SKILLS, BUT IT IN NO WAY SHOULD DICTATE MEANS AND ENDS TO THE LANGUAGE TEACHER WHO SHOULD USE THE LABORATORY AS A TOOL TO ALLEVIATE HIS OWN ROUTINE TASKS. MORE EMPHASIS MUST BE PLACED ON READING LITERATURE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE, AND, BECAUSE LANGUAGE IS A VEHICLE OF THOUGHT, TEACHING LITERATURE WILL NOT ONLY GIVE THE STUDENTS SOMETHING WORTHWHILE TO COMMUNICATE, BUT ALSO WILL ENCOURAGE THE REHABILITATION OF THE HUMANITIES. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "THE MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL," VOLUME 49, NUMBER 2, FEBRUARY 1965, PAGES 102-105. (SS)

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*Foreign Languages and the Humanities**

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MORE than a decade ago, Earl McGrath, then United States Commissioner of Education, opened a new era in the Foreign Language field with his now famous speech at the annual meeting of the Central States Modern Language Teachers Association in St. Louis. The much-needed re-assessment of our profession which followed, in turn set the stage for a general overhauling of foreign language teaching and led us into a period of unprecedented activity—though not necessarily of unprecedented success.

To be sure, McGrath alone cannot be given the full credit for what is going on in our field today; the field had been prepared by many events and factors which, furthermore, accelerated the revolution he set in motion. On the one hand, the ever-increasing flux of American tourists travelling abroad gave at first implicit, then louder support to the clamor for more "useful" foreign languages. As Robert F. Roeming, managing editor of *The Modern Language Journal*, points out, "it was from the members of the middle income group, finding themselves affluent enough to travel abroad, that came the greatest public support for the 'Speak the Language' approach."[1] On the other hand, America's growing economic, military, and strategic involvements around the world and the position of leadership she had inherited on the morrow of the war, made it imperative for her to remedy her tragic shortcomings in the field of foreign language competency. Finally, the *coup de grâce* to an antiquated state of affairs was given by Russia in 1957, when the launching of the Sputnik proved to be the greatest blow to their complacency the American people ever had.

As a result of this totally unexpected feat by Russia, the United States re-examined her whole educational system, many university officials and education specialists travelled to Europe to discover the "secret" of their sucessful instruction, much was written about Johnny and his schooling, and the foundations increased their financial support of education. Naturally, this soul-searching affected the study of foreign languages as well, and especially Russian, since, as was later revealed, we would have known about the Russian achievement six months earlier had we been able to read Russian scientific journals.

The climax of the uphill fight for more and better foreign language study was reached in 1958 when Congress enacted the National Defense Education Act which lumped foreign languages along with mathematics and sciences

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* This is a revision of a paper read at the Eight Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, Phoenix, Arizona, October 9–10, 1964.

[1] Robert F. Roeming, "Traditional?"; *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 2 (February, 1964), p. 98.

as academic subjects in dire need of help, financial and otherwise, and from whatever quarters, even the Federal Government!

Mention should be made also of another factor which undoubtedly contributed greatly to the present interest in, and concern for, foreign languages, that is the recent development of electronics and the resulting "interference" of this pressure group.

At any rate, and whatever the reasons might be, our profession is enjoying today an unprecedented boom and impressive statistics are readily available to attest to the successful adaptation of our discipline to the needs of the Nuclear Age. Thus, whereas language laboratories were practically non-existent a decade ago, today we can boast of more than 6,000 language laboratories across the nation. It is true that some of these laboratories are not used properly—whether it be because of lack of trained personnel, lack of materials, or simply indifference and lack of faith in them on the part of some teachers—and it is also true that in some cases they were built not to answer a need, but rather to take full advantage of the funds suddenly made available. After all, language laboratories have become a status symbol, and they provide schools with an undeniable center of attraction for visiting dignitaries and for PTA Meetings.

Likewise, we can—and do—boast the fact that more than a million and a quarter youngsters are at present *actually* studying foreign languages in our elementary schools. More precisely, it seems fairer to say, from my reading the many articles dealing with FLES and from my limited personal experience—my own children, direct participation in FLES programs and repeated visits to elementary schools—that more than a million and a quarter children are presently "dabbling" with foreign languages in elementary schools throughout the nation. In too many cases, FLES programs were introduced in a rather "hit and run" fashion, ranging from "extended play-time" to some kind of "foreign awareness" with, occasionally, an attempt to make it a genuine academic subject to be taken seriously and demanding accrued effort on the part of the learner.

Furthermore, the much discussed question of continuity and articulation is far from being solved and quite often the best FLES programs end in a *cul de sac* or, what is worse, in a disheartening constant re-beginning of the same language or a switching over to a new language —made possible by the availability of a newly-hired teacher whose departure, the following year, however, will mark the end of the program or a return to the very beginning of the language first started.

Time has come, it seems to me, and to others as well, if we judge by the large number of controversial articles appearing in our professional journals, to take hold of ourselves, to look with a critical eye at what is being done, at the results achieved—and not only at self-deluding figures. Time has come indeed to answer the question raised by a recent contributor to *The French Review*, "To what extent are we guilty of encouraging, at least tacitly, the expectation of miracles which will prove impossible?"[2] Time also has come to heed the warning of those who see "the non-utilitarian, unapplied and purely cultural aspects" of language study "in danger of being crowded out of the picture by electronic translating machines and communications laboratories."[3]

It is not my intention to argue for a return to the pre-atomic status quo with respect to foreign language teaching. Undoubtedly, much was wrong with the situation then, for reducing foreign language study to reading and translating is as unfair and as stultifying as reducing it to oral comprehension and speaking ability—especially when the latter is still further reduced to its least human aspect, the reflex mechanism.

It is not my intention, either, to advocate the rejection of language laboratories. Rather, I suggest that they be used for what they are, that is a new tool, a new device to alleviate the teacher's routine tasks while enlarging his scope. No more than the book—an older tool which we have been using for more than two centuries—did when it was first introduced into the classroom, the language laboratory should

[2] Edward T. Heise, "Let's Talk Sense About Language Teaching"; *The French Review*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 4, (February, 1962), p. 176.

[3] Thomas Palfrey, "Literary Translation"; *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain MLA*, Vol. XVII (May, 1964), p. 8.

in no way dictate ends and means to the language teacher.

Since language is, on the one hand, a "branch of acoustics," it is clear that laboratories and electronics can and should play an important role in developing this technical ability in our students; yet, on the other hand, language is also something else, and in this age of utilitarianism and technology, it might be well to remember that language is first and foremost a "vehicle of thought," (and there cannot be any real communication with a machine), and lastly, though of no lesser importance, that one must have something worthwhile to communicate.

It seems to me that too much emphasis is placed on "training" in our schools, as opposed to "educating"—and it appears that the blow struck against us by Russia, in 1957, increased still further this stress on "training." This attitude has reflected on foreign language teaching as well; today, the stress is on "training," just as it has always been with some teachers, even before Sputnik, though they had not yet heard of the "new key."

At the same time, and to answer in an erroneous democratic way the demands of ever-increasing numbers of students attending our colleges and universities, American education has tended to level down to the lowest common denominator, forgetting, as Louis B. Wright emphatically reminded us, that "somewhere, somehow, we must preserve the beauty and the wisdom that will never be found in mediocrity."

As we look over the past, and the present as well, one may well wonder whether the fault lies in the method, or even the objectives, or in the men themselves and their approach to their chosen profession. No matter the method in fashion, there have been, still are, and always will be teachers of foreign languages who succeed in maintaining the required equilibrium between the various facets of language learning, and what is more, who succeed in imparting to their students, besides a sound knowledge and command of the language, those very humane qualities which make them excellent students and teachers and thus responsible and needed members of the world community.

If the Sputnik fever which seized the United States after October, 1957, was salutary in that it brought about a needed re-examination of our educational system, that same fever can prove lethal if it leads us "to substitute mere technical training for the all-round education we must furnish our children."[4]

Education, let us insist, is not the mastering of a series of gestures and movements; neither is it the accumulation of a certain number of facts. It does not consist in filling a container to capacity with a large variety of products. On the contrary, in the education process, facts are first and foremost means, means toward the fullest possible development of the intellectual, emotional, and physical capacities of the student. As a matter of fact, what is important is not the amount of facts a student remembers at the end of his college career, but rather, to paraphrase a well-known statement, what is left in him once everything has been forgotten.

The present emphasis on science and technology has affected all areas of knowledge, including those disciplines which stand at the very heart of what we call the Humanities. As foreign language teachers, it is our duty to assert and to prove by our very attitude and practise that the "fundamental value of formal language study is humanistic and always has been."[5] To that effect, we must stand firm on our belief that the study of foreign languages must open up onto the study of literature. It is bad enough that we have to teach beginning language courses in our colleges and universities—especially in the so-called common languages—but let us not make this study an end in itself, rather let us bring it, as rapidly as possible, to its logical and rewarding conclusion, the reading of literature in the language.

Indeed there are signs—though often unnoticed, drowned out as they are by the rumble of the language laboratories—that serious consideration is being given this question, as witness the recent resolution unanimously approved by the Minnesota Chapter of the AATSP: "language departments of our colleges and universities should carry out their professional responsibility to the public by de-

[4] Arthur Beattie, "Language Study in the Space Age"; *The Arizona Foreign Language Teachers' Forum* (April, 1963), p. 8.

[5] Roeming, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

claring the teaching of basic skills in a *first* foreign language to be *inappropriate for college* level courses."

Undoubtedly, foreign languages have to be taught as an end in themselves, just as other trades are and should be taught, but we do not feel that this limited goal should be the total objective of foreign language study in school, and particularly not in institutions of higher education. Let the commercial and technical schools perform this part of the task, in other words, let them assume the *training* while we concentrate on the *educating:*

> The teaching of foreign language in Universities must not be levelled down and reduced to the level of bilingual guides or Linguaphone records for hurried tourists. . . . We are not branches of the Berlitz school. . . . Our task is to form civilized and cultured young men and women, and not parrots who can only repeat sentences learned by heart or commonplaces prepared serially.[6]

We are all too aware of the tremendous progress made by science and technology in the last 25 years, and of the parallel decline of the humanities—at a time when they are more than ever needed. It is my contention that our profession, so long as it does not reduce language learning to "something you do" than enables you to acquire "something you need,"[7] can and will play its part in the all-important fight ahead to prevent man from being completely outdistanced by science and technology and thus becoming their slave by default. Furthermore, if as Northrop Frye declared recently, the teaching of literature is best equipped "to train the imagination to fight for the sanity and dignity of mankind,"[8] the teaching of foreign literatures, adding the extra dimension of cosmopolitanism without which no true education can be achieved, should stand at the very heart of the fight for the rehabilitation of the humanities.

For ten years now, we have been witnessing a "drôle de révolution" in our field, a "révolution" which, as a critic pointed out recently, threatens to "totally *sapirize* and *skinnerize* our language field" and which, if unchecked "will lead to the eventual mechanization of subject matter and regimentation of human beings with whom we deal."[9]

Our task is immense, but not any more difficult than that of all those who, concerned with the fate of man—whether they be scientists or humanists, professors of foreign languages or professors of English—have chosen the teaching profession. As Professor Paul Hazard recalled, at the height of the Nazi onslaught, and with special reference to the professor of French,

> It is the task of the foreign language professors to get young minds accustomed to get out of themselves, to get out of their normal environment, to come into contact with other forms of expression and thought, and thus enrich them by making them more supple. It is their task to break down their narrow horizons and make them partake of the existence of the world. It is their task, also, to struggle against the invasion of technology and machines, by reminding them that man's ideal does not consist solely in enslaving matter for his needs but also to multiply his powers of life, through the acquisition of a better nourished thought, a more delicate sensibility, and a more fraternal soul. . . . It is their task to make others understand that humanity is not limited to a single moment—the present—nor to a single nation—however powerful it might be; rather, it is their task to link the present to the past, and the nation to all other nations, while preserving both the memory and the cult of the desperate shouts, songs of love, hymns of hope, epics, comedies, dramas, which the most divine of the sons of men, genuises, have scattered in space and time.[10]

[6] Roger Asselineau, "Language and Literature"; *The French Review*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 6 (May, 1964), p. 684.

[7] Herbert B. Myron, Jr., "Languages, Cultures, and Belles Lettres"; *The French Review*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, (December, 1963), p. 177.

[8] Northrop Frye, "Elementary Teaching and Elementary Scholarship"; PMLA, Vol. LXXIX, No. 2B, (May, 1964), p. 13.

[9] Myron, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

[10] Paul Hazard, "Le Professeur de français"; *The French Review*, Vol. XIV (February, 1941), pp. 277–283.